

# William Cobbett: cottager's friend

*Silas Clifford-Smith*

William Cobbett, English writer, democrat, and North American emigrant of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was vitally concerned with gardening as it affected the agricultural classes. His books and opinions were known in early colonial Australia yet it is intriguing that he is rarely mentioned in modern historical accounts and his influence in Australia is yet to be fully documented.

The son of a publican and small-scale farmer, William Cobbett (1763–1835) grew up in the English market town of Farnham during the years of the American Wars of Independence. His father was a rare local supporter of the American Revolution and from him William seems to have inherited his love for dissident opinion and unpopular causes.

Cobbett's interest for ornamental gardening began while working as a garden boy at Farnham Castle. A visiting gardener told him about the impressive royal gardens at Kew. He immediately decided to see them for himself, so the next morning he walked thirty miles to Richmond, and persuaded a Kew gardener to give him a job in the King's garden. Cobbett only briefly worked at Kew



Portrait sketch of William Cobbett, from L. Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett* (1813).

before returning home to work in the fields and gardens of his home county of Surrey.

Eager to experience the world, Cobbett moved to London in 1783 and secured a clerical position in a legal firm. He soon bored of clerking and the filth of London and joined His Majesty's 54th Regiment of Foot and was soon dispatched overseas. Cobbett arrived in Canada in 1785, and was involved in the border disputes with the infant United States of America. Cobbett spent seven years in Canada and rose up the ranks to become a regimental sergeant major. He returned to England in 1791 and promptly left the army.

Back home he publicly campaigned against the financial and physical abuses in the army, and soon made important enemies. When threatened with libel and physical assault, he escaped with his family to France. After six months in revolutionary France, he fled in 1792 to the United States and made his home in the capital, Philadelphia. He quickly established himself as a teacher of English to French émigrés and also became a journalist and writer of political pamphlets, often writing under the pen name 'Peter Porcupine'. During this period, Cobbett became increasingly fascinated with gardening and took great interest in horticultural developments in the infant republic.

He was subsequently sued for libel and decided to return to his homeland. Back in England, Cobbett continued his writing career and established the *Political Register* newspaper, which soon became the largest selling paper in the country. Being the weekly paper's principal writer Cobbett kept a close eye on what was happening in national politics, but he was increasingly troubled in how England had changed since the Napoleonic Wars and the arrival of the industrial revolution. His developing thoughts saw the *Political Register* move away from populist conservatism to become the most radical newspaper printed in Britain. Cobbett—

the democrat—also established a published account of debates in Parliament titled *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*. Several years later, after bankruptcy, Cobbett sold this pioneering publishing title to his printer, a Mr Hansard.

In 1817 Cobbett again fled to the United States. This time his home was Long Island near New York where he set himself up as a farmer. While living in Long Island he wrote *The American Gardener* (1821) one of the pioneering books on horticulture published in the United States. After living in North America (in total) for seventeen years, Cobbett returned to England.

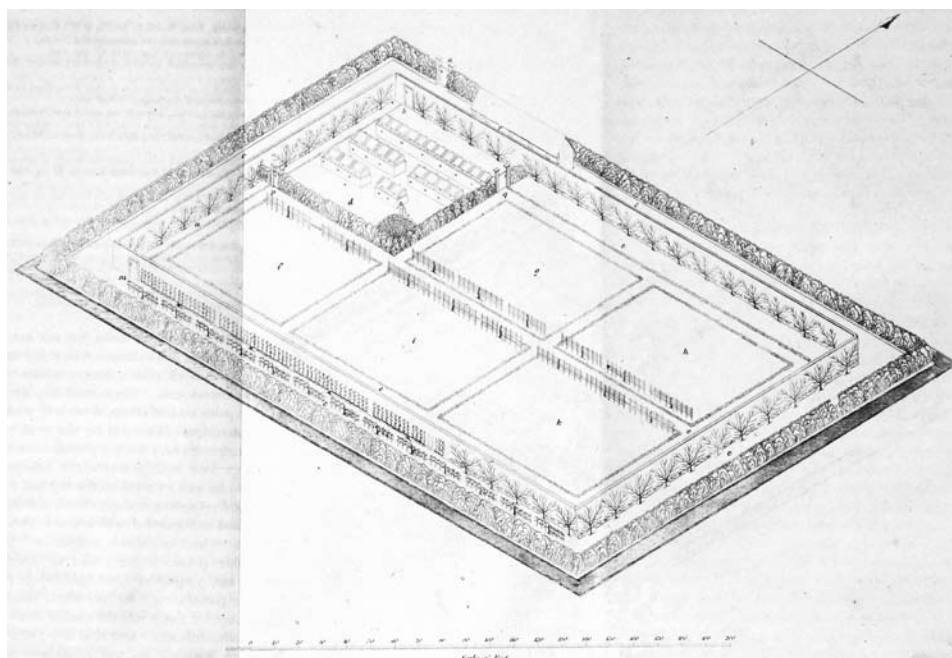
From 1821 to 1826 Cobbett began his famous horseback tours of the English countryside. Cobbett's lively accounts of these journeys were popular with his readers and were later published in *Rural Rides* (1830). The author's frank realist writing style, in this classic work of English literature, certainly offers a counter view to the romantic images being created by contemporary writers and artists such as Wordsworth, Austen, and Constable. While writing *Rural Rides*, Cobbett also published *The Woodlands* (1825), a book on silviculture that reflected his interest in trees.

After his return to England in 1820 Cobbett established a plant nursery at Kensington where he grew many North American trees, such as the black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). Another American species he successfully promoted was a variety of maize which he modestly called 'Cobbett's Corn'. Cobbett believed that maize was a wonder crop that had the potential to transform English agriculture. The problem was that Indian corn (as it was then known) was

frost sensitive and with only a few months of guaranteed frost-free weather in England there was insufficient time for the maize cobs to mature. Cobbett's son discovered a dwarf strain of maize growing in a French cottage garden and obtained some seed. Trials back in England found that it grew well through England's shorter summer. To help sell this variety Cobbett published a book titled *A Treatise on Cobbett's Corn* (1828), which as a gimmick he printed on paper made from maize fibre.

The 1820s was the decade that saw Cobbett's greatest writings on garden related matters. This period saw a massive increase in the British population and a corresponding rise in the middle classes. In response, there was increased interest in learning about plants and gardening. The best known garden writer of the time was John Claudius Loudon (1783–1843), a prolific Scottish-born horticultural journalist who wrote extensively on garden matters. While Cobbett did not write as much as Loudon on garden subjects, he was no slouch either. According to Cobbett authority, Associate Professor Ian Dyke, Cobbett 'composed for publication a remarkable thirty million words—a total doubtless unmatched in the history of English letters'.

Cobbett updated and expanded his earlier *American Gardener* for the local market. His *English Gardener* was first published in 1829 at a modest five shillings and was written for a well-heeled audience. In the introduction to a 1980 reprint, garden historian Anthony Huxley compared Cobbett's *English Gardener* with other contemporary garden tomes, such as Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Gardening*:



*Compared with such, The English Gardener, with its comparative paucity of illustrations, may appear a thin, dull volume. However, its limited size must have made it a good deal cheaper, and I imagine that Cobbett's general reputation must have encouraged people of the time to buy it.*

A productive garden laid out in plats, borders, paths, and walks, illustrated and described in Cobbett's *The English Gardener* (1829).



William Cobbett rewarding industrious labourers on one of his rural rides, from Robert Huish, *Memoirs of William Cobbett* (1829).

*The English Gardener* was a best seller and went through many editions up to 1860. For modern readers, the most entertaining parts of this book are Cobbett's condemnations of certain crops such as purslane, which he describes as a 'mischievous weed, eaten by Frenchmen and pigs when they can get nothing else'. But by far his most despised plant was the potato, a plant introduction which Cobbett felt was indicative of the sad decline in the agricultural lands. He felt that the rural poor's dependence on this crop would lead to calamity. Several years after his death, he was partially proven right, with the mass deaths in Ireland that followed the spread of the potato blight.

Cobbett defined the health of the rural poor by a simple test. Happiness for a rural worker was defined by access to the three B's—bacon, bread, and beer. To Cobbett these were the three clear measures of agricultural happiness. This homespun belief may explain why Cobbett wrote *Cottage Economy* (1822), his best selling book during his lifetime. In this cheaply priced volume, Cobbett taught the cottager some of the skills needed to be self sufficient, including instructions on how to make bread, brew beer, keep livestock, and how to weave hats out of grasses. It is highly likely that copies of this humble work accompanied many migrants bound for the English speaking colonies.

Cobbett's influence in Australia is less well known. Cobbett never visited Australia and made little mention of Australian plants and gardening in his many publications. But the Australian colonies were starved of skilled gardeners so it is understandable that there was a need for

gardening advice. One of the earliest local works to provide gardening guidance was the *Australian Pocket Almanack* of 1825. This volume included a long extract on Cobbett's views on successful hedge making, which had originally been published in his *American Gardener*. Apart from republished extracts, Cobbett's garden themed books were certainly being imported into the colony during the 1820s and 1830s, and possibly well into the middle years of the century. Sydney bookseller James Tegg was advertising Cobbett's *English Gardener* in the *Sydney Herald* as early as February 1837, several years after Cobbett's death.

It is hard to say how much influence Cobbett had on early Australian gardens but looking at artistic images of productive gardens created in the early decades of the nineteenth century, many are similar to the small holdings known by Cobbett in England and North America. Gardening in the early years of the Australian colonies was mainly about survival and self efficiency rather than ornamentation, so it is logical that the writings of William Cobbett, which promoted self sufficiency for rich and poor, would have appealed to many local settlers.

**Silas Clifford-Smith** has admired William Cobbett since his school days in England. This abridged article is based on a lecture he gave at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, in 2006. The author wishes to thank Professor Richard Clough, Richard Aitken, Megan Martin, and Colleen Morris for help in research.